In-Between Worlds:

Mexican Kitchen Workers in Chicago's Restaurant Industry

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COOKIN' UP IDENTITIES

It is just after 2 am on a Wednesday as we enter Lucille's. The five of us cram into the small corner black-vinyl covered booth and settle in amongst the din of music and conversation. The well-worn wooden table has been polished smooth by years of use. The first round of beers is passed around; bottles clank, then silence, then the collective thud of bottles hitting the table after the first swallow has been taken. It is as if a collective and cathartic sigh has just been given. These four men, tired and haggard, have all completed double shifts—working both lunch and dinner today—as cooks at the French restaurant up the street. Their baggy black and white striped trousers mark them quite clearly as restaurant workers. Wednesdays, as are Sundays through Tuesday's, are great nights to be at Lucille's, because at this late hour anyone who walks in the door more than likely is a member of the bar-restaurant industry. In fact, Lucille's is an institution amongst industry workers, since it is open until 4 AM and serves food right up to closing. It is here in the dark back corner, just far enough from the main bar where a majority of patrons gather, that the best conversations take place. While not hiding from anyone, since most everyone in the bar knows each other, Jimmy, Jose, Hector, and Danny feel most comfortable. All four of them, in their mid to late 30s, have been line cooks for four years at Le Bateau Ivre, an upscale French restaurant, just down the street. They have known each other for several years, and all hail from adjacent towns from a state in northern Mexico. After finishing the first round of drinks, I went to get a second for the group, chatting with the bartender intentionally to give the guys plenty of time to bitch about work and wind down on their own before I started in on the questions I had for them.

As I come back with another round, I slid into the booth and place the bottles in the center of the table to find that they were still eager to reconstruct their evenings. Jimmy puts his now empty bottle on the table and props his elbows up and rests his head in his hands. Exhausted he exclaims "man, I am done. Toasted. We were in the weeds tonight, I didn't think we'd make it out." Jose turns and echoes his sentiment. "No doubt. But we served it up! We were on!" To which Hector adds, "yeah we crushed tonight, we easily did 250 (patrons). For Tuesday night, that was just crazy." Danny's relatively quiet, nursing his beer, so I turn and ask him "how do you keep up the pace? I mean, it's got to be exhausting night in and night out." Jimmy and Jose each give a soft push on Hector's and Danny's shoulders, as if to push them out of the booth, and all four of them start to chuckle. I asked them what that was all about. Jimmy pipes up "because it's about teamwork (as he laughs and points at both Hector and Danny) they each had two orders sent back tonight! You guys got punked twice tonight! Ha! Made you look real good!" Without delay, Danny retorts "Shut up fool, not like it's never happened to you! Besides that was bullshit." Seeing a moment to interject, I ask, "why's that?" Danny polishes off his Heineken and states "Look it's either the servers covering their asses, because they made a mistake in taking down the order, or really it is just about customers who don't know what the hell they are ordering or how it's supposed to be prepared or taste." As Hector reaches in to the middle of the table to grab a second beer, he says "But seriously, that's an issue. This guy ordered chops well done, and then sent it back and said they were dry. No shit, really? How is that going to happen? You ask for it and so you got it." Danny, in empathy with Hector, states, "I had a hanger steak sent back, same thing, ordered it medium. Medium? That's just a waste; I did it. But it's a waste, at that point you cooked out all the flavor. It just tastes off at that point. The guy who sent it back said it tasted funny." Hector, staring at Jimmy and Jose for a second, to dramatize his point, "the

other one I had tonight was an escargot. Some fool send it back, that was too oily and too salty. Whatever. I was like, this is just stupid. And then I got to make it all over again. I don't even ask the server what the real deal is, because it doesn't matter the customer is always right. Whatever." Jose turns and looks at me "After a while you just blow it off. People come in here, they have the big money to pay for whatever they want. Most of these people have no taste, half of them don't understand what they are ordering." Jimmy nods and says "True that. And they don't appreciate it. Just because you live in this neighborhood doesn't mean you are (raises his hands for air quotes) "cultured" or know anything about what good French food is. People come here because of the reputation, not because they know food." "Yeah, I feel that. Like sometimes you just want to walk out into the dining room and just call them out. Like WTF? Seriously? and tell them to get the hell out" exclaimed Danny. Jose "That's a dream, that can't happen." Hector, now finishing his second beer, emphatically, "that's the thing. It's what we know, but they don't. No one sees us in the back of the house (in the kitchen) so we just have to deal. The people don't realize that we're the ones who know what we're doing; we're the damn experts. We're the ones who make this place. Reputation rides on us." Jose adds the cliché "All the guts, but none of the glory." Jimmy exhaling and rolling his shoulders back states "Man, but I'll take this any day of the week. I'm not working construction or anything like that. But that's so true; we are the ones who make the show run. Mexicans are the heartbeat of this industry. Without us, they might as well close down."

I was to have many conversations like this, not just with Jimmy, Jose, Hector, and Danny, but with all the men I had gotten to know in the neighborhood's kitchens. After hearing some of these themes over and over, a host of questions arose: Was their frustration with patrons a boast,

to make them appear more capable as chefs? Was it to claim higher knowledge, and therefore higher status? Were these compensatory gestures to make them feel like they have more agency than they do? Was it a way for them to cope with cooking dishes for restaurant in which they wouldn't be able to afford dining in on a regular basis? Or, was something else going on here that I couldn't see? I wondered if there was something to how they undercut the highbrow/lowbrow distinction in terms of the way they view themselves and the patrons. I wondered how the status of the restaurant they worked in, as opposed to their status as workers, made sense to them. I wondered how producing high-end cultural goods in this wealthy neighborhood related to their status as undocumented Mexican immigrants. I wondered how they thought about their contradictory position—in that they are central to the economy of the city and yet are politically and socially marginalized. Most of all I wondered how these issues shaped their self-concepts and how those self-concepts change depending on context.

This chapter explores how the identities of these undocumented Mexican kitchen workers, mediated through their investments in their work, move along a continuum from porous and malleable to rigid and essentialized. Through highlighting this continuum, we see a multiplicity of identities emerge, depending on social context, through which they make sense of themselves and their position in society. In the first part of this chapter, I reconstruct three dominant discourses that these men use to articulate, express, and explain their identities and self-concepts to themselves and to others in relation to their culinary practices. These three viewpoints help us both see the multi-faceted nature of the motivations and aspirations that drive these men, as well as to help us better understand the processes through which their identities are forged through their work. These discourses play out, quite obviously, through discourse—through heightened moments of social exchange that occur in every field: shop talk.

First, the chapter discusses how the culinary cultural practices and production they engage in provides meaning, orientation, values, and direction, in terms of cultural and aesthetic dispositions towards identity (their own and the culinary tradition they are working within). Second, it draws out how cultural practices generate community and solidarity amongst others in this milieu, which in turn forges a belongingness to the culinary traditions wherein they labor. Third, it explicates how cultural appreciation and understanding is cultivated through these cultural practices and production. In so doing, these experiences open up and widen their cultural, social, and intellectual horizons. This section concludes with a discussion about how each one of these discourses circles around the dominant theme of how—through cultural practice and production—these men come to find a home in another world, in another culinary tradition, not necessarily of their own choosing.

The chapter then turns to address how the deep immersion into another culinary tradition generates an irony of Mexican identity formation: just as much as it undermines notions of any stable definition of "Mexican," it simultaneously circumscribes their identities when thinking about their relationship to cooking Mexican food. Given the globalization and multiculturalism of food in Chicago, when viewed in terms of pride, one might think there would be natural inclinations and desires to cook Mexican food. However, these men seem to have no inherent attachment to Mexican food. In fact, they separate themselves from it. After their experience in the restaurant industry, they view Mexican food through market logic; Mexican food is just one more commodity to produce and sell in the economy for them.

Finally, I highlight their reflections on their place in the restaurant industry, where something almost paradoxical emerges: an essentialized Mexican identity. In this context, the work ethic of other racial-ethnic groups is called into question. Mexicans define themselves

against other groups in terms of what they see as their unique and austere work ethic which they believe separates them from other groups and defines them as the group most suited to run kitchens. In this situation, pride of ethnicity and work ethic become one and the same. Furthermore, when discussing job opportunities and hiring practices, a sense of insularity and exclusion comes about through a "Mexican only" hiring policy. Finally, this disposition is bolstered and reified when discussed in terms of "loyalty." Loyalty, for them, becomes synonymous with being Mexican. While these conceptualizations galvanize their Mexican identity on one hand, they also cultivate xenophobia of other groups and become internalized modes of self-regulation within the industry.

Given the globalization of capital, the transnational migration of people and movement of labor, societies are becoming more multiethnic and multicultural. As people construct (a possible plurality of) identities out of local material and symbolic resources, those local environments are never autonomous and are always related to larger global contexts and networks of political-economic-and social relations. Economic structures curtail the freedom of identity construction—reminding us that culture is always semi-autonomous—and that identities are never free-floating constructions—and yet, "ethnicity," "culture," and "identity" are porous, plural, relative and highly context dependent.

Ethnographic insight shows that the identities that emerge out of these conditions may or may not contradict, but they do occur simultaneously; it is not a dichotomous situation where one must decide one way or another. These tensions raise the problems of the limitations of theorizing identity when we prioritize one definition over another and overlook the the totality of experience of everyday life, or the complex dynamic of "a whole way of life." Together these tensions between different aspects of identity address the following central question: How do

their own reflections on their experiences and their own self-understandings supplement and further our understanding of the world of undocumented Mexican immigrants—a world which is both highly visible, in terms of the centrality of the restaurant industry in the cultural economy of the city, and yet almost invisible and unheralded from the point of view of the immigrants themselves.

Cultural and Aesthetic Dispositions:

A dominant theme that drove how these men constructed their identities was the cultural and aesthetic dispositions—the attitudes, emotional frames, and orientations— that they cultivated through the development of their culinary skills and the cuisines in which they were immersed. For many of these men, the kitchen was not simply a place where they worked and crafted cultural goods, it was also a space within which they constructed their identities. In this sense, cooking was more than the job to be done, but was the process through which they interpreted themselves and the world around them. Finally, when viewed on the whole, many of these men understood their occupations, not as ends in themselves, but as opening up possibilities, whether hypothetical or possible, stimulating them to think beyond distinctions of "us" vs. "them" or "Mexican" vs. "French," or "Italian" vs. "American." While Mexico is an incredibly complex amalgamation of peoples, customs, and cultures that vary by region, my strategy was to take the categories they used at face value, because it piqued my interest to see how they put these terms to use to define themselves and others.

Late Friday night, I stopped in at Venezia, the high-end Italian restaurant in the neighborhood where David and Eduardo had finished cooking. We walked out the back and

down the street to have beers with Juan, Oscar, and Tony, who had just finished their own shifts at Le Bateau Ivre. As we pushed a couple of small tables together to make room for all of us, I began to consider how work and identity went hand in hand in the United States. Those who become committed to their occupation often find it much more meaningful then those who do not; however, I wasn't sure what the creative or craft-like component involved in cooking might reveal. I asked Eduardo, a prep cook in his late 30s, how his experience in cooking Italian food for the last several years had influenced his life, he responded:

> When I first came here, people would always talk about how in America you are your job. I didn't really understand that until I was a couple of years in. Because now I think of myself as a cook, as what I do, but more in that I am an Italian cook, that is who I am. I really think work makes who you are, especially the type of work you do.

I was startled by Eduardo's response, thinking that this seemed extreme, but then David, a garde-manger in his early 30s, expressed something very similar when he replied:

> I think it is about how you can lose yourself in your work, especially if it is important to you. I think it does change you, I think my tastes have changed since I have been working here. I know I really like Italian food now. In fact, I am always craving it.

Tony, a line cook also in his late 30s, sitting across from Juan, immediately interjected and said "so much so that his girlfriend thinks he's crazy…(then in a high-pitched voice mockingly added) always Italian this or that…Like he thinks he's Italian now!" This was met with a series of chuckles and snorts from the group, as they all seemed to take please in the teasing of one of their co-workers. Eduardo retorted quickly:

> If it matters, it matters. It's true. I don't think about myself like I did when I first came here. The work makes you who you are, especially when you care about what you do. It's more than just turning trays out now. I'm proud to be at Venezia. I'm turning out some awesome Italian food, I feel like that's just part of me now.

Shifting in my booth, I again find myself desperately trying to inject myself into their long soliloquies on work: BH: (Black Hawk interjecting into the conversation) "When you say that, do you think you have become "less Mexican" in working where you do? Several of the guys at the table looked at me quizzically and asked "What do you mean less Mexican?" BH: "I mean…do you think of yourself as only Mexican? Does cooking French or Italian or American food day in and day out relate to the ways you think of yourself? Does it?" Juan, a veteran line cook in his 40s, suddenly broke into the conversation:

> Sometimes you see yourself this way, and think of yourself as Mexican, and yet you look at it another way and you see yourself as something else, I don't know but your identity is all messed up. You know? You start doing double shifts all week, and its tournedos d'agneau, tendron de veau, poisson, moules…it's like French all the time.

For these men, their self-interpretation was not a simple reflection of their work; their identities were refracted through their work. Oscar, another veteran line cook in his 40s, added:

> I've been on the line for seven years now (at Le Bateau Ivre) and I think by now I know more about French food than I ever could about Mexican food. I mean, that's what I grew up on, but I probably couldn't cook lots of the dishes my mother makes. I'm not saying that I don't think of myself as Mexican, I am Mexican, but there is something else to it now, now that you ask.

Seeing an opportunity, I ask: "Right. What is that something else?"

> Tony: I think he means that sometimes some of us feel out of place, you're thinking French all the time and yet you are Mexican, but sometimes it seems like both maybe.

This duality or "double consciousness" that Tony expressed was something that others felt aware of as well. This was expressed quite poignantly when I asked what that duality felt like:

> Juan: That's what I mean, how come you know so much about somebody else's culture, it's not yours, but it is—this is what we do –it is in some sense ours too…we cook the food, people from all over the city come to eat here because we do what we do. Whether you're an Italian cook or French or whatever…or like Jesse down the street (at The Firehouse)….I mean you're in-between two worlds sometimes.

In trying to get at some of the experiences that have shaped their sense of identity, I inquired about how they thought of Mexicans in general as running most of the kitchens in Chicago and how, if so many Mexicans were cooking such a variety of food, other than Mexican, what this meant to them. "Do you think people know that when they come into one of your restaurants wanting "authentic" or "genuine" French food, that it's all Mexicans in the back of the house cooking?" This caused a great deal of laughter amongst everyone as they all acknowledged that this was the biggest open secret about the restaurant industry in Chicago. It turns out that my presence hardly elicited these discussions. They talk about it all the time. Oscar replied "I think it is funny, when you ask your questions, because we always talk to ourselves about how sometimes you hear the customers talking about how this is so "authentic" or how the restaurant advertises itself as "genuine" or from this region of Italy….I always want to say it's really authentically Mexican, and the region is Sonora (a state in northern Mexico)!" Juan nodded along and agreed "Totally. It is such a sham in some ways. I don't mean it isn't great food and they will get a great meal, it is just that…what does authenticity mean, when we are the experts? You tell us what it's supposed to mean." Taking this as an opportunity to push the conversation further, I asked "But what about you guys, isn't the passion you feel for what you do rooted in developing yourself? Doesn't that influence the way you think about things?" Eduardo quickly responded "That goes back to what we were saying before about how being in another culture makes you feel part of both at once, but I sometimes think I identify with Italian food and culture more than I do Mexican. I think the more you do it, the deeper you get into it and the deeper you get into it the more it influences you." Through the conversation I came to realize that their sense of investment in work is also how they deepen their cultural knowledge, knowledge that they consider part and parcel of their identities. This seemed to strike a resonant chord with them:

> Tony: I think that's true. I can list off everything on our menu and what goes into it. I know every ingredient. And then you're cooking something and then you start thinking, you know this spice could go great with that meat, and you could serve it with this vegetable…like it just starts to make sense to you. I never thought I would be thinking like that. But, like, you start thinking that has to be that way; because that's the way the French would do it.
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> Juan: Working together in French food, no one knows us, but we are like our own gang, of "French- Mexicans," because we cook better than anybody else. I think once you become invested in what you do and develop a passion for it (cooking French food) it puts a barrier up between us and others. I mean it is us against others, it provides you with a sense of identity.

Walking away from yet another late night, I thought about how work for many, is not something that ends with the shift for these men; the identification with the cuisine of one's occupation is not simply something one leaves behind at the end of the day, but becomes an integral part of their identity. This integration opens up the process of identity construction as one's self-interpretation becomes mediated through the food culture within which one is embedded. These processes of identity formation undermine traditional ethnic boundaries, as well as upend taken for granted distinctions of high/low cultural, tastes, and status distinctions among patrons and workers.

Community and Solidarity

Against the backdrop of racialized stigmas of undocumented Mexicans, their precarious position in the labor market, and the anomic sense that many feel far from home, these men come together to try and offset those conditions. Another main theme that came through discussions of cooking and identity, was how community and solidarity emerged out of these shared cultural practices and cultural production.

On occasion, I was able to meet up with four other men (three line cooks) from Le Bateau Ivre (Alphonso, Jesse, and Tony), and Roberto (sous chef) from the Firehouse steakhouse. We would get coffee inside the restaurant and hang out on the loading dock behind The Firehouse. These were great opportunities to talk, as I could catch them on their break in-between the double-shifts they were working and discuss my latest questions and thoughts. One particular afternoon, sitting on upended milk crates and leaning against the cool brick wall, as the smells of kitchen swirled out into the crisp autumn air, we talked about the role they occupied in the restaurant industry. In particular, I inquired about how they viewed themselves as Mexicans producing non-Mexican food, and how, if at all, that affected the way they saw themselves. Jesse told me:

> When I first started I thought this was bullshit. I didn't know anything about this (French food) and when we would go out after work, I felt outside the group. Why is everybody talking about French this and that and who is a good French cook, and who does what food better than others…why are we talking about this and not Mexican food, our own culture? But then you come to understand that this is what we do, who we are, it forms a kind of community of sorts.

I was immediately struck by the word community and tried to see if I could capitalize on this moment to get an understanding what community meant. I asked "Do you mean because you work in the same restaurant?"

> Alphonso: No, not just because we work at the same place, but because we share the tradition of cooking French food (or American, Italian). That's what holds us together. I've seen plenty of guys come and go, but they don't want it the way we do, they do get it, but to them it is just come in get it done and leave. That won't work in our kitchen because we take pride in what we do. It becomes the glue that holds us together. Like on crazy nights when we get slammed (too many customers ordering at once making it almost impossible to keep up with orders), having somebody there who is not on it, that is a liability to all of us. We won't tolerate that and that comes because what you do matters to you and it matters to the rest of the crew. Because when you get hit (too many customers) it's a challenge to rise to it, to show how good you are and that takes serious pride. Both in yourself and others because you don't want to let anybody down.

This sense of dedication exposed a more non-rational commitment to work, one that wasn't discussed in terms of means-ends logic, but rather one about investment and the value their work held for them as cooks. Continuing along this line of inquiry, I asked how the quality of their cooking mattered to them.

> Tony: I think when other guys show you how to do something or how to do something better, that makes you take things more seriously because they do, because they want to be better and they want you to do better, not just faster, but better technique, better food, do it right because it matters. I think it not only makes you a tighter crew (of workers), but it makes you tighter in terms of what we all want.

Talk of technique, skill, and precision all seemed to point to something more than the work itself. The work itself became a conduit for connecting with others, sometimes with others that would not appear to be straightforward in any way.

> Jesse: People don't understand our world, what we do, the hours we work, all of that. And then you get all the weird looks when you tell them you are a Italian cook, especially from other Mexicans who don't know you who work in some total other job, like you sold out or something. Not all the time, but you get one every once in a while and all of a sudden it makes you feel tighter with the boss (the white owner) than it does with other Mexicans somehow, because you share something that is deeper in some ways that means something to you, you know?

For a minute I was preoccupied with Jesse's comment, leading me to first think that solidarity extended to everyone. Thinking that Jesse would feel closer to the non-Mexican owner than to his own co-workers left me perplexed. I would return to this question time and time again, seeking to qualify what this sense of solidarity meant and how far out into the restautant industry it extended. Was it really the case that everyone felt solidarity because of the occupation? Was it something that general?

Taking up this issue of solidarity on another occasion, I found it was much tighter bound that what I was previously thinking by Jesse's opinion. When digging into the issue deeper, it became clear it was really something that most of the men I spoke with felt was just amongst

Mexican workers. Trying to find another angle into the question, I raised the issue of having to depend on each other as a kitchen crew to be effective, to keep their jobs, in hopes this might open the issue up.

> Tony: Most of us here are here for a reason, to make money, not that I don't like the job, but keeping your head about you-he gets tough sometimes-that's why we have to depend upon each other. We have a common goal and given all the other shit (documentation) you basically have to band together, because who else is going to care.

This sentiment of needing to band together was something that I pursued with Roberto and Alphonso, two of the older veterans who provided mentoring for the younger men. I asked them how this feeling of solidarity was cultivated.

> Roberto: That's the responsibility of the older guys. You've got to show guys how things work. I don't just mean cooking stuff. I mean the stuff about how to get by here. You can be real nervous or get homesick or whatever, and being on your own is no good.

I asked for specifics, for how they cultivated this sentiment. Alphonso, described some of the ways that community was generated, and echoed this notion of responsibility and the significance it held for them:

> Like we meet with you, or we get guys together after work on days off to do something, the blow off steam. You know how we know all the guys of the other restaurants in the neighborhood, it's not just about the fact that a lot of us are related, it's more than family, it's important. It's not just about getting information, to know what's going on here , but getting information from back home, or wherever, it's about keeping connected in a bigger sense.

Roberto added to what Alphonso said and continued on:

> Man that's especially rough at first. You have to rely on each other that's why so many of us know other guys in the neighborhood here. It is really on the older guys to make sure that the others feel welcome. You can't do it alone, you just won't last in this job. It is also why we have the staff meal together. You eat together. It brings together as a crew, as a team. It makes for better environment, because everybody's on the same page, that way you get along and everyone knows each other, so you feel like you belong.

In that back alley, our conversations traced out the different ways that community and camaraderie were generated. Eventually I came to understand how cultural practices and cultural production provide these men with community and solidarity, it also illuminates a sense of collectivity that comes through the connection to the culinary traditions in which they are engaged. It is through the practice and production of the cultural products that generate a sense of belonging and community. This feeling of community heightens the sense of investment they have in both their work and each other, not just as workers, but as a group that shares a collective experience in and out of the kitchen.

Cultural Appreciation

Another set of conversations I had over the course of many nights out with a group of prep and line cooks, Diego, Tomas, and Rodrigo, as well as the sous chef, Alex, all from Bistro Marguerite, yielded some of the following insights into how their occupation shapes their identities. This came through talk of mastery, skill, expertise, and pride in one's work, all which served as expressions of cultural appreciation.

> Diego: I think it changes you, if you are serious about what you do. You learn to care about different things, you learn to appreciate things you would not have before. This isn't like formally schooling, you get to know it through making it, through actually creating it.
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> Tomas: I think having worked in the restaurant, that it opens up other things for you—you get interested in the culture itself, want to know more about Italian culture or French culture and where things come from, where they grow them, how they cook them, what they taste like.

This sense of change comes not only in the act of cooking, but in terms of the imagination as well. As both Alex and Rodrigo would explain, cooking opens up windows onto the past and onto the future:

> Alex: Yeah, totally, like the more you know, the more you want to know. Like, you work with certain ingredients and they have a taste, a smell, a feel about them, and you use them, and all of these things have their own history and place where they are from and I think that makes it more interesting.
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> Rodrigo: You know, after what I have experienced, I want my kids to be able to live a bigger life than the one I do, to try all sorts of different food. Not that I want them to go into the industry, no, no, just I mean that the world is so much bigger than the one I grew up in and I want them to take advantage of that, to appreciate all the things they can take advantage of. To travel to places, to see them, not just on TV.

And yet, the material reality that impinges upon those aspirations is also quite apparent to them:

> Alex: Yeah, look what happened to all those cooking shows …people went insane over them. Bourdain, Zimmer, all those guys who get to go all over the world and you think, I can do that, I want to try that, but I'm stuck here cooking 6 days a week. That's not me, but I bet I'd understand more of what is going on than any of the viewers. Hell, we live in this, this is us….

A particularly charged response came from Rodrigo, who thought of travelling just for the sake of competition.

> Rodrigo: I'd like to travel to France. I would love that to see the farms and the people, and to eat in their restaurants. Could you imagine if a bunch of us showed up in Paris in some restaurant and sent our food back because it wasn't cooked right! They would f---ing freak, especially if we told them why they weren't doing it right. They would lose their S—t! That would just mess up everyone's compass. Turn it all upside down.

BH: Do you think the TV shows have helped or hurt your jobs?

> Tomas: In so many ways it is good for business, especially where we work. It makes it more desirable, more hip and cool to eat out, so we can't complain. It keeps us working.
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> Alex: Yeah, but the problem is, and maybe Bourdian is the exception, no one ever shows who is cooking in the kitchen. I mean here (in Chicago) it's us, it all Mexicans. But that is never shown, it would be cool to see something like that and not hide whoever is in the back of the house (kitchen) from people. Maybe that would open people's eyes more.

BH: What about doing this day in and day out, does that ever burn you out or make things mundane?

> Diego: One thing I think is that as far as appreciating what you are doing…You cook your way into a culture I guess. That's how I did it. I mean after so long, you just start doing it and it isn't a big deal, it's like you are bi-lingual or can speak three languages now. But that is for the pros, or the guys that take it seriously, it is craft or art and you value it like that.

This feeling of being craft was a sentiment that others shared as well; in fact, it was a feeling that grounded them in their work:

> Tomas: Yeah, Diego is right, I think you find yourself at some point just at home in it, for me having been on the job for 10 years, I don't think about whose culture it is, because it is mine. This is what I do, this is what I am. And when you look at it on that level, when you see guys who see how cooking and food relate to life, and the better you want to become at it…I don't mean in that culinary school way, but in a passionate way.
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> Alex: there is a real passion for many of us to cook. I know we take great pride in what we do. We turn out some the best food in the city. And I'm in charge of everybody back there. The reputation of the place rests on me, rests on us, to be professional. You have to respect what you do and you have to appreciate what you put out there the people. It's not flipping burgers. I'm talking about all of it. From the ingredients you select to the techniques you utilize, right down to the presentation, I want every plate that goes out to be perfect.

Cultural practices and cultural production offer a number of conduits into cultural appreciation that extend far beyond simply "liking one's job." The acquisition of skills and professionalization simultaneously served to cultivate a sense of cultural appreciation. Through the interaction and production of culture, many of the men see wider possibilities, while not necessarily obtainable, and a broader curiosity, if not understanding of the world.

Through the creative nature of food and cooking, culture is always embedded in work in some way; however, trying to unearth exactly how it is manifested became key to understanding how the active and productive nature of the occupation opens up a realm of self-definition and of self-understanding. Cooking provides a way into thinking about one's identity, the focal point around which new cultural and aesthetic dispositions and appreciations are cultivated, collective

identity of community and solidarity fostered, and how pride in one's occupation opens up new horizons of who one is and who one can be. By looking at the shifting contexts and the meanings they attribute to work, we can see how these men construct and reconstruct self-interpretations that interweave ethnicity, culture, and work in a plurality of nuanced and layered ways.

Identification and Distance from Mexican Cuisine

After having discussed their identification with cooking, non-Mexican food, I thought it would be interested to compare this with their interest in cooking Mexican food. Several general questions animated my discussions: Given the constraints of working in their specific cuisines, would they rather be cooking the Mexican food of their families'? What did they think of the status of Mexican food within the restaurant industry in Chicago? If they could open their own restaurant, would it be a Mexican restaurant? Drawing on a number of in-depth face-to-face interviews, where I could spend time exploring out their personal reflections on these questions. As it turned out the answers were not what I was not expecting. For either economic or cultural reasons, the more malleable self-interpretations I had previously seen became much less flexible when I inquired about their thoughts and aspirations for cooking Mexican food.

Economic Reasons

When I asked Arturo, a late 20-year-old prep cook from Bistro Marguerite, about his career goals and if he ultimately wanted to end up cooking Mexican food rather than Italian, he replied:

> No. I wouldn't want to do that at all. It would be too limiting. If I could open my own place, I'd do French since that is what I am trained in. Besides I think there is a stigma about it, if you're Mexican and you go and open a Mexican restaurant it's like that is what everyone expects…that that is all you know. I want to make a name for myself, I want to make money, and it certainly won't be doing that.

While expectations of others played a role in how they saw themselves, Arturo's comment about making money became much more important in their evaluations. Hector, (a late 40s head line cook) put the issue of Mexican food and the issue of business in the following way:

> I think to do real Mexican food, other than someone like (Rick) Bayless, it's really hard to get established. It's hard to make a name out there since there's no real market for regional Mexican food that people can understand. I like Bayless since he has been so successful. Not just because of that, but because he has a show, he has his empire. I think for people to go to some starter place that's not sponsored by corporate or investors, I don't think people want that (the desire for more high-end Mexican restaurants).

Rick Bayless, the world famous award-winning chef, who owns two of the best known Mexican restaurants in the U.S., in addition to having a number of books and a TV show on Mexican cooking, would often come up often in these conversations. Bayless serves as a touchstone for many, since he has raised the profile of Mexican cuisine and become very successful in the process. While I had anticipated antagonistic comments towards Bayless, comments of "whitewashing" Mexican food or of "cultural appropriation," their comments about Bayless were always about his economic success. Adding to this sentiment, Jose, (a 30 something garde-manger at The Firehouse) went on that this success was rare in the restaurant industry:

> Bayless made it to the very top. He's got a TV show, a line of products…the guy is a superstar. I think that gives many people a false image. What was possible for Bayless is 1 in a million, besides he's White. How many Mexicans do you see who have their own cooking shows?

While racial identity played a factor in Jose's analysis, it was not about cooking Mexican food, it was in relationship to perceived opportunities and resources. This sense of cooking Mexican food was tethered to economic success. For those having spent enough time in the industry to gain a sense of what was viable and not viable, decisions about what to cook were made in strategic terms. As Danny remarked:

> There's no way you can get that kind of money. To do it the way I would want, I'd want my place downtown. To make money you have to cater to people who have money. You could do something smaller in a smaller neighborhood, but then you're just a local mom-and-pop joint and I'm not doing that.

Even Roberto, my longtime friend and confidant, explained that this sense of success, of making money, and gaining status was very real; especially amongst the younger generation of cooks he saw working today. He seemed to think these aspirations often blinded the younger men from the realities of the business side of cooking:

> I think there has been a generational shift. I think many of us who have been in the game for so long have come to realize we won't have the money to do it. At some point you have to be realistic. I think the younger generation, the younger guys, they are under the spell that they can come through and tear it up. But that's just the food part, they don't think about the business side of it. Unless you have lots of funds or you get big sponsorship, it just won't happen. The rent, the cost of supplies is just too much. I'm not saying you can't, I mean look at Carlos at Mexique (Executive Chef Carlos Gaytan). He did his own thing, but he is also doing modern Mexican fusion – Mexican-French, not old school, but more new school and its more neo-fusion. If he survives then, that may open a window, but still…

These more "economic" approaches to thinking about the possibilities and deterrence's for pursuing or identifying too closely with Mexican food dovetailed with the more "cultural" reasons that others gave. The economic status one could gain cooking Mexican food for a living was tethered to the low cultural status many thought Mexican food had in the restaurant industry economy.

Cultural Reasons

When interviewed about issues of identity, ethnicity, and Mexican food, one of the first topics that arose was the perception of Mexican food. Because of the sad commercialization of Mexican food through American-style fast-food staples like Taco Bell and Chipotle—simply tacos, burritos, nachos—many kitchen workers held good reasons for being repulsed by the idea

of cooking Mexican food as an occupation. Ricky, (a 27 year old fish cook at Bistro Marguerite) explained that:

> It's sort of a joke because you played right into the stereotype. It's like who wants to see one more Mexican cooking beans, I mean it's just sad. I don't want people in the industry to think of me like that. If that's all I can do, or if I open my own place that's what people would assume, because that's the preconception of what Mexican food is for most people.

This framing of Mexican food as fast food was something that many shared. While knowing that Mexican food was much more rich and diverse, they nonetheless accepted this dominant interpretation as a fact. The mainstream perception of Mexican food was the reality that they had to contend with in making career choices and thinking about upward mobility. Antonio (a 30-something grill cook at Firehouse) was more emphatic in his response to my line of inquiry:

> Hell no! People look at Mexican food like it's Taco Bell or burritos and have no imagination or desire to try anything else. Given the way people think of Mexican food, I'll take my skills elsewhere. I want to make something off myself and be successful. I'm an American chef; I cook classic American. I'll keep that (cooking Mexican) at home instead.

Jesus, (a late 30s saucier at Marguerite), made a distinction between "home" cooking and food and "restaurant" cooking and food. For him, these were two separate worlds that never merged together. "Home" cooking carried with it the stigma of being a lowly immigrant. In addition, he sees "home" cooking as a sign you are without talent or worth in the eyes of others:

> To do Mexican for many would be like doing street food or would reduce his creativity to doing just what comes quote naturally or that's all he knows how to do. If you're Mexican, you have to disown your own heritage in order to become successful. Everyone stills cooks (Mexican dishes) at home, that won't go away, but that's thought of as home cooking, not restaurant food. It's about being an immigrant and people looking at you, treating you like an immigrant, like you don't know anything or all you know how to do is work with your hands or landscape or some shit like that. You need to be here, be American for generations, before that embarrassment about being an immigrant goes away. But by then, those Mexicans are so assimilated, they disappear. To make it in the industry you can cook anything but Mexican. I've been trained in French, I know French. I want to open my own French place. I don't even know if I could do my own food anyways (Mexican).

Mauricio (mid 50s swing cook at Firehouse) gave a more jaded perspective than Jesus. He thought that striking out on one's own and being successful cooking Mexican food was something that would not garner respect in the restaurant community, nor would be be a career path to recognition and acclaim:

> I've been in this (the restaurant industry) for a lifetime. Look around, how many restaurants are out there that are really good quality Mexican restaurants? How many that people recognize and respect? Frontera, Salpicon, Adobo, but the others come and go. They don't last…you wonder why? Who says "Let's go out for Mexican" and mean a sit down service meal? People grab burritos, or they think late-night bar food. That's not to say that there aren't great Mexican restaurants. Like Jesus said, once you see the big time, you want to get the recognition. You get the write-ups in the papers and the coverage in the magazines, you want all that. Who wouldn't? All that stuff is important to the guys so they aren't ghettoized or relegated to Pilsen or a neighborhood that's just us (Mexicans). They want to go big, not some burrito joint.

Alex (a late 20s pastry chef at Venezia) spoke in a similar tone about the possibilities of ever pursuing Mexican food as a career. He told me:

> I don't think there's really a market for the pallet for the food, other than a couple of restaurants. How many can make it? And if you don't have the marketing people, who's going to come or think that it's good? You look at Mexican cooking shows on TV and it's some White guy, I think that makes it safe for White people to identify with it, but you don't see Mexicans on there doing Mexican style shows. I'm not dissing him (Rick Bayless) he treats his people really well and everybody respects him. It's just that it's different if you have a Mexican on camera. Sure maybe they think the food is authentic, but it doesn't make me feel enthusiastic. I don't know, it just doesn't seem possible for everybody.

The distancing that comes about through the perceived status of Mexican food within the restaurant industry combined a number of cultural factors: visibility in terms of sought after dining, the perceived status of what Mexican food is in the public imagination, the respect or lack thereof given to some restaurants cooking Mexican food and not others, the selectivity of who gets recognized for cooking Mexican food, and the lack of social mobility to gain status, recognition, and acclaim, all shaped their perceptions and sensibilities.

Combining Economic and Cultural Reasons

Adam, (a late 40s sous chef at Venezia) drew on both economic and cultural reasons simultaneously to express what he thought was the impediment of ever cooking Mexican cuisine. Adam, felt by default, that anyone Mexican trying to do Mexican food would always be stigmatized.

> The issue here would be about discussing authenticity and creativity. Especially in the high-end (restaurants) in Chicago. These (restaurants) require exclusive culinary training. This is a very special domain of cooks, specially trained wealthy white kids who pay for culinary education. For example, they are using liquid nitrogen in a distillation processes for making mousses. You can't just walk into the kitchen and use that stuff. It's more like chemistry than cooking. This requires a formal credential. If you don't have that paper, then you're out. We've talked about it, actually a lot. If you want to become successful, you can't cook Mexican. Bayless can do this because he's playing at it. It's exotic to him. On the other hand look at Homar Cantu (a third-generation Mexican American chef who was a then rising star in the haute-cusine section of the industry). He has to disappear into molecular gastronomy. For him to do Mexican, that would make him just another wetback cooking beans.

Of particular interest in Adam's comments were his racialized comments on Bayless. While he points to Bayless' outsider status, he ironically points to the success of a Mexican-American cook who turned his back or "had to disappear" into a whole other form of cooking in order to become successful.

The diverse responses covering the gamut of economic and cultural issues, documents the dynamics at play in identifying as Mexican and the place of Mexican cuisine in the restaurant industry. There exists a deep tension between their self-identifying Mexican status and their distancing from one of the things that defines every people, and the occupations of these men—their food. Despite their culinary expertise, and appreciation of their occupations, they viewed Mexican cuisine through many of the same frames as everyday Americans, as fast-food and of low culinary value and status within the industry. The reflexivity, self-awareness and

understanding of the economics of the restaurant industry, and the cultural-status position of Mexican food within this industry, testify to an awareness that goes far beyond the kitchen walls. However, it is this very awareness that served to limit their self-conceptualizations as Mexican, insofar as they viewed Mexican food through market logic, and their occupational status and value through how they perceived others would view them if linked to a Mexican restaurant. As a result, none of them saw Mexican food as either economically or culturally feasible if one wanted to become upwardly mobile in the restaurant industry.

Reasserting Essentialism

Moving from the more creative, culture-oriented aspects of the restaurant industry to the political-economic context of the restaurant industry, a new set of factors needs to be considered. In looking at the post-industrial service economy of Chicago, what occupations are open to undocumented and often uncredentialed workers. In addition, we must keep in mind that their lack of official political standing, leaves them particularly vulnerable to employer's whims, dismissal, or the downturn and downsizing that comes with economic ebbs and flows. In a tight and competitive labor market, we must discern the psychological and social-psychological strategies for securing and maintaining employment in the restaurant industry, the support mechanisms to buffer these political-economic conditions, as well as the unintended consequences these yield for them.

When confronted with the reality of their place in the restaurant industry, their precarious employment status, and the inner workings of getting jobs and hiring practices, an essentialized Mexican identity emerges. Here, the work ethic of other racial-ethnic groups is called into question. Mexicans define themselves against other groups in terms of their unique and austere

work ethic that they believe separates them from other groups and defines them as the group most suited to run kitchens. In this situation, pride of ethnicity and work ethic become one and the same. Furthermore, when discussing job opportunities and hiring practices, insularity and exclusion come about through a "Mexican only" hiring policy. Finally, this disposition is bolstered and reified when discussed in terms of "loyalty." Loyalty becomes synonymous with being Mexican and is expected from every Mexican worker.

Work Ethic

When asked to talk about the overwhelming presence of undocumented Mexican immigrants in the kitchens of Chicago's restaurants, a type of symbolic ownership or entitlement is invoked:

> Carlos: Every kitchen is a Mexican kitchen. We run this industry. Look around you. Show me one worth it that's not. If you're not Mexican don't bother, its not for you, you have to be Mexican to work here. We run this. Without us, nothing would run, We do all the cooking. If we had power we could just walk out and what would they do?

Others corroborated this sentiment, qualifying it in different ways:

> Eduardo: It (the kitchens) wasn't always ours, we earned it, we came in and started working and then more and more of us started getting jobs and then it was only us, nobody else could last like us Mexicans, we are tough and we just took over.

This claim of territoriality over Chicago's kitchens can be seen as emerging out of the tension between the hostile treatment undocumented Mexicans experience, the way they are portrayed through mass media, and their exclusion from mainstream intuitions, juxtaposed with the occupational niche they have come to dominate at the center of the city's economy. This territoriality is most often manifested in discussions of "work ethic." Almost all the men I encountered felt that other groups, particularly Blacks and Whites had poor work ethics that disqualified them for work:

> Jesse: Blacks and Whites are lazy. They don't want to work. They don't know how to work hard, so they could do what we do.
>
> Pedro (fry cook at Firehouse): Blacks are the laziest; they just have no place here. The White boys that come in here, usually with cooking school degrees, have no experience of working hard. They think it is like the classroom where they work at their own pace. That is not real life. They may have technique but there never been in the trenches in real world. They just get chewed up in the real world.

Contextualized within the post-industrial landscape and the politics of immigration, these racialized opinions must be viewed in relation to the occupational opportunities open to undocumented immigrants. Taking pride in an economic arena within which Mexicans have come to dominate, provides one with a sense of superior standing. As Mauricio (line cook at Firehouse) discussed with me:

> This is for hard working only, and no one works as hard as Mexicans. That is why we are the best; that is why we get the jobs. That is why we keep them. No one can do what we do. That's why you don't see the Blacks or the Whites in the back of the house. They don't have what it takes to make it.

Just as much as race was related to work ethic, so did skill-sets and know-how about how the industry operates and what is required from the kitchen staff when the restaurant is overcrowded:

> Diego: Blacks and Whites are too slow; they can't keep up. They don't know how fast it is, when you get hit, and then bam, bam, bam, they come in and you gotta be ready, you gotta be able to handle it. That pressure. You can't do that without knowing how to put it down and get to it.

This awareness of hard work in relation to skill sets helped explained how unskilled workers could become skilled workers. Many of these skills were not specialized, but they did require a certain dedication for their acquisition:

> Danny: If you're asking me about how I keep my job, it's because I work hard. I mean you gotta have a job today and security, especially when you can be so easily replaced. Look around I mean how hard is it to peel vegetables? How hard is it to wash dishes? Or

> really how hard is it to make soup? I mean it is hard, but it is not like you need special skills for this. You can pick it up as you go. I mean there are several guys who start out as dishwashers who work their way up the chain to become cooks. So if you think about that, plus the other things we have to worry about (the implicit meaning here of "other factors" as being "illegal" or without the proper worker visa documentation) if you screw up, you're gone. Many people can take your place in a second because they want jobs, so you have to work to keep your job.

The same acquisition of skills Danny discussed was something that others felt was inherently a Mexican way of learning:

> Antonio: We can learn anything, just by watching, Show me something and I can pick it up right away. I don't have any papers saying I went to cooking school, but you show me and that's all I need. You work hard, you learn fast, that is the Mexican way.

While Mexican workers have been esssentialized as lazy and shiftless at points in history, as well as inherently hard-working people at others, here we see essentialzing, not by outsiders, but internally through their own active self-characterizations. However, not everyone expressed this conflation. As others pointed out, doing work that others would not want to take on, was also an explanation for Mexican success in the restaurant industry:

> Rodrigo: I think you are asking about work that many people don't want. This work is hard. It is not glamorous… No one wants to grow up to be a dishwasher. It is hard on the body, on the feet, it is very physical and the hours are long. Sometimes it seems like no one wants this job. But I really think that you have to understand this kind of work in order to do it and that's not something everybody is prepared to do.

An occupation, where one does not need official credentials for the labor involved, can be a fiercely competitive arena. Given the precarious state of undocumented workers in relation to job security, it is possible to see how "work ethic" and a sense of Mexican identity as tied to it, become fundamental in defining and maintaining this as an occupational niche. Furthermore, given that this world is one where any individual can excel based on merit, this becomes an important realm of social mobility that these men do not want to surrender. In addition, this

identity based on work ethic not only legitimates the group, it proves others wrong that Mexicans cannot be successful and central players in the city's economy.

This sense of Mexican work ethic may bolster the group, but it also obscures several unintended consequences. While it is true that Mexicans have come to dominate the cooking staffs of Chicago's restaurants, this may lead to a false sense of superiority, as well as a false sense of status and worth relative to others in the post-industrial service economy. Furthermore, this may lead to a false sense of agency, in that they control their own destiny, and the restaurant industry's kitchens, based on work ethic alone.

Job Opportunities and Hiring Practices

Work ethic alone does not explain the Mexican dominance in kitchens. A second reason why undocumented Mexican immigrants have come to dominate the positions in kitchens in Chicago, is because of the formal and informal networks they have established with each other. These networks are the basis by which one hears about the job, gains access to an interview, and is provided with a reference or someone to vouch for them. The case of Mexicans becoming kitchen workers isn't due to their inherent enthusiasm for cooking or working in kitchens, rather it comes in part from being plugged into the occupational networks where one can capitalize on opportunities that arise. If a member of one's family or a friend is working in a restaurant somewhere, there is always the possibility that that restaurant may need a temporary worker or replacement worker on short notice. These networks are always active in the community since people are always looking for work. In this way a job opening is always quickly filled, because everyone knows someone who's looking for work or for a better job. When asked about this notion of networking in the restaurant industry, Tomas told me:

> I definitely think there is a network. I mean, my brother and my cousins all work in the industry. If one person gets a job, then that usually leads to another person getting a job. If there is a job opening somewhere that you know about or you hear about you can always than refer a family member or friend. That's part of being family, the thing is helping each other out and working in the kitchen isn't the worst thing in the world compared to a lot of jobs. It's great. So who wouldn't jump at the chance to get a good job?

Alex echoed Tomas' comments with the following:

> I guess that's just part of being Mexican. You always have family or friends that can hook you up. Someone's always working somewhere, so you're bound to get work. And I think that's one of the good things is that you get to work with your friends and family. It does a good thing for the community by helping each other out because we have to stick together and look out for our own.

This sense of networking is one of the reasons that kitchens do not need to advertise most opportunities. Odds are, if you need a dishwasher, or someone to fill in as a prep cook, all you have to do is just go into the kitchen and make an announcement. Roberto conveyed the notion of job advertisements and the way the networks operated in many kitchens as follows:

> No one needs to go advertise, all you have to do is just ask. Someone always has got somebody somewhere is looking for work or for better job, so why not hook up someone you know. Sometimes a better spot opens up that a friend or family member who is working in another restaurant could jump into, make more money and be in a better position. I've been in enough kitchens to know that this is just standard operating procedure. Don't think they (had managers, owners, corporate people) don't know what they're doing. They know the deal. They know all they have to do is come back into the kitchen and ask and we will be able to help them out. We save them so much in advertising and costs it's crazy. That's also one of the reasons that Mexicans stick together is that we vouch for each other. You get somebody a job and they can't just quit because you gave the boss your word. If they walk, they damage your credibility so you don't hire an idiot. And besides if that person burns you, then basically they're out. You walk off the job, don't ever asked me again for help.

The notion of job networks serves as the key mechanism to incorporate other undocumented Mexican workers into the restaurant industry. However, given the freedom in many kitchens to hire whomever they want, this does not mean that jobs are open to anyone. Hiring becomes very

exclusionary in that the men only want to hire "their own" (other Mexicans). Even Spanish speaking ability, no matter place of origin, is not enough:

> Arturo: Just because you speak Spanish doesn't mean shit. You're not Mexican. Whatever, why should we hire you? Most of the guys calling the shots are Mexican, we hire our own. If you're not one of us, you're out of luck. When you get a call you got an opportunity and you can't blow it. Because whoever hooked you up- if you screw up, it is not just on you, it is also is on them, and you can't let that person down – you can't let that person down-you can't let your own people down. That's embarrassing. No Mexican wants to be embarrassed or embarrass another Mexican – no other group is like that – we take great pride in that. That is why we don't hire outsiders, they don't have pride like us.

As in seen in both Roberto's and in Arturo's comments, there is an exclusionary mechanism at work in terms of who is hired. In addition both point to how the kitchen staff is responsible for hiring. While restaurant kitchens may have become an economic niche that they regulate, it is also an economic sphere that severely regulates them. They use these networks and opportunities to recruit friends and family into these positions, but are also exploiting themselves by using their own family networks and friendship networks to replace other workers. While you may have secured a job for someone, this manner of recruitment furthers a system of domination, by replacing one fungible worker with another. Furthermore, the work ethic can be turned around and used against someone. If someone makes you look bad because they fail to produce, you in turn may lose your position; therefore, the work ethic combined with the opportunity network can become a highly regulated environment where everyone polices themselves and others. Management need not expend any resources for employee recruitment and need not exercise power or authority from above, since the kitchen becomes it own self-regulating machine. While these men may think these networks provide them greater mobility and autonomy, they also turn everyone into exchangeable commodities, when any one worker can be replaced in a heartbeat by a verbal announcement.

Loyalty to the Community

Given the undocumented status of so many of these men, the lack of social trust in Non-Mexicans is palpable. Belonging to the group comes with an unquestioning loyalty to one's people. Because feelings of social exclusion and lack of political standing are always in the background, those whom one can trust and rely on for any number of concerns becomes of paramount importance. Eduardo confided in me that:

> There is no way our crew would hire some other race. You can't trust those people. You can't rely on those people like you can your own people. If you are not Mexican how can we trust you? We help each other, whereas others might try and screw you over. Because we understand. So why would you hire someone who is not Mexican? You can't trust them. They would try and steal your shifts or your job. No loyalty. Loyalty is everything in our world.

This lack of trust in other groups comes from job competition in a tight labor market. Being Mexican carried with it the implicit notion that you were loyal and trustworthy. Others remarked on how outsiders could exploit their undocumented status. Since most Mexicans are undocumented workers, this would never be a possibility, since everyone is in the same predicament:

> Oscar: You can't trust other races. They might have to narc you or call INS, to try and take your job, or they screw up and try and blame you. Mexicans handle their own business, and besides no Mexican does that shit. You respect your own people; you don't screw around with your own people.

Oscar points out an inherent vulnerability in being an undocumented immigrant, then David points to how both the work ethic and the social networks converge in the notion of loyalty:

> David: They don't want it the way we do, they do get it, but to them it is just come in get it done and leave. That won't work in our kitchen because we take pride in what we do. It becomes the glue that holds us together. Like on crazy nights when we get slammed, having somebody there who is not on it, that is a liability to all of us. We won't tolerate that and that comes because what you do matters to you and it matters to the rest of the

> crew. Because when you get hit (too many customers) it's a challenge to rise to it, to show how good you are and that takes serious pride. Both in yourself and others because you don't want to let anybody down.

In David's reflection we can see both a sense of seizing an opportunity in the labor market and in terms of work ethic to keep one's job. Here these two notions slide into loyalty and letting someone down, or letting the crew down by not pulling your weight would be a violation of the social trust that has been established. Here the world of work and the social world become one and the same. Tony used the words "team" and "family" to illustrate how he felt that their mutual investments in each other created a bond

> Tony: It's like you're part of the team, people look out for each other. We help each other, we cover for each other, and we help each other get jobs. I don't know if there's anything Mexican about that but, I think it is just that we all know each other in one way or another. People say it's like a family but it's kind of more than that in a way. Sometimes people are competitive, about things but in the end you don't want to put yourself ahead of others. Everybody has to work as hard as everybody else. You don't want to show people up because that'll come back on you. So I guess in that sense we have a community, it is sort of like family in that way.

Tony's sense loyalty also illustrated how aspects of respect are folded into the family, insofar as you did not disrespect another family member by trying to best him or make him look incompetent. Juan added to this sentiment with an incident that happened to him early on in his career. He reminisced about the time he felt like he first belonged in this community and was part of something larger:

> If one of them from the front of the house (one of the servers) comes in and starts bitching at you, that's it. That's when you really know that you belong to a group, because right away someone will stick up for you. You can get chewed out by the head chef or one of the line cooks, but when somebody from the front comes in the line is drawn. The first time that happened to me, that's what I felt like I really belonged. These guys were behind me. If you do something wrong, then you hear about it; but you hear about it from one of your own. I think that's what keeps everybody together in a way, since we take care of each other. We don't let someone from the outside handle our business, we handle our own business inside. I think that's really what the family aspect is about—you do take care of each other.

Roberto offered another dynamic at play in this sense of community, one where everyone becomes a stand in for everyone else. Here the return of racialized stereotypes comes into play, not necessarily from the outside, but from everyone's own self-conscious awareness of what they mean:

> I think there's also something else that plays into this. I think nobody wants to let each other down. When it looks bad for one of us, it looks bad for all of us. When you talk about being Mexican, you don't want to be that guy who was seen lazy or is blowing something off, because obviously you can get canned. But it reflects on us as a team and sometimes I think no one wants to screw up because no one wants to be that guy who brings the race down. I guess this is a stereotype or something, but sometimes I think it matters to people; people think about what other people think.

Through the multiple meanings that the word loyalty takes on, whether community, family, team, or self-consciousness of the co-dependence of everyone on everyone else, there is a perceived collective amongst Mexican kitchen workers. This sense of community helps cultivate a strong sense of work ethic, a sense of reliance, and most importantly a sense of social trust amongst other undocumented workers that you will have their back as they will have yours.

While the loyalty and trust these men express for each other help them form a sense of community and collective investment, these same sentiments can be seen as xenophobic which not only exacerbates the distance between groups in society but reinforces their social isolation. In addition, the forced dependence upon other undocumented Mexicans, requires a lack of social trust in everyone else, which in turn also exacerbates their social isolation. When taken together, we can see how these occupational viewpoints and strategies of gaining and securing employment come with a series of costs that may not be readily apparent. In their attempts to cope with their situations, the unintended consequences of these strategies may lead them to become self-deluded about their agency, autonomy, and sense of security, all of which obscures

and exacerbates their social distance from others and makes them actively complicit in perpetuating their own economic, political, and social marginalization.

Conclusion

This chapter explored how undocumented Mexican kitchen workers construct a multiplicity of identities, mediated by their investments in their work, through which they make sense of themselves and their position in society. These identities are highly dependent on the social context within which they are constructed. By looking at the processes by which they draw upon ethnicity, food, occupation, culture, and skill as material and symbolic resources to construct their identities, we are able to better understand how their work is part and parcel of how they negotiate the changing contours of social life.

By viewing the multiple identity constructions the undocumented workers undertake collectively, a number of tensions emerge around high / low status distinctions. These men are central to the post-industrial service economy and simultaneously economically, politically, and socially marginalized. The status of the restaurants in which they work and the products they produce can be held in contrast to their status as workers within those restaurants. Furthermore, the cultural awareness of restaurant patrons can be challenged by the culinary knowledge these workers possess. Finally, their undocumented and marginalized position must shed light on their own practices of excluding others from the labor force.

In addition, we must draw out the tensions between the cultural and economic spheres. Identities develop through cultural production—wresting agency from economic determinism—while—economic structures curtail the freedom of identity construction—reminding us that culture is always semi-autonomous—and that identities are never free-floating constructions.

Here we see their identities move along a continuum form highly porous and eclectic to highly rigid and essentialized, as well as the global flux of culture running up against local economic constraints. Depending on the dimension we explore, we are led to different formulations of identity. Different spheres (culture, economy) operate through different logics and create different modalities of formulation. The cultural sphere is defined by theorizing an investment and involvement in work, through understanding the activities, practices, and processes of cultural production, where one's self-understanding is grounded in what one does. The economic sphere, by contrast, can be theorized through detachment, a stepping out of commitments, and viewing the world in terms of one's abstracted place in the labor market and occupational competition. As a result, we see how their own reflections on their experiences supplement and deepen our understanding of the world within which these undocumented Mexican immigrants live and work—a world of irreconcilable tensions.

These tensions lead to a series of questions around identity: How much of it is ethnic? How much is cultural? How much is occupational? Are all these identities compartmentalized or are they part of a unified whole? These questions prioritize the individual and ask us to settle on one or more "types" that each must fit or reconcile with the others. However, we realize that their self-interpretations change by context and that self-interpretations are also interpretations of those contexts, we see these individualizing questions as missing the mark and a need for an alternative to these traditional modes of inquiry. This alternative prioritizes the world of the undocumented immigrant over the individual; prioritizing the social world over the individual dramatizes how people only understand themselves and others as part of a shared collective, which provides them with the meanings and orientations they have. Accordingly, through the

concept of world we can accommodate all of these tensions as different co-existing modalities of social life.

Ethnography seeks to explain why people do what they do, as well as how people see themselves past, present and future, so that an outsider to this world can understand. In doing so, ethnographic work is only significant insofar as it tells us what a particular "world" under analysis—that is the system of meanings and practices of a group—tells us about our shared social world more generally. In order to develop this relationship, ethnography must methodologically grasp the totality of the meanings that constitute that world. Focusing on the concept of world provides a way to map the contours of people's lives, communities, environments, and modes of social interaction that are not just contextually based, but are structured, defined, and determined in ways that are often overlooked and taken for granted. The concept of world, as used here, is not to define the traditional sociological "structures" (economic, political, educational) that organize social life, rather it is to make light of the situated everydayness of routines and interactions against which those sociological structures can be better understood. These men (individually and collectively) understand, conceptualize, and construct their world(s) as meaningful (through what they do, what they desire, what they are about, how they regard themselves, how they value what they do, etc..).

The analytic framework of world provides a way to simultaneously traverse—particular and general, concrete and abstract, immediate and future, necessary and possible— terrain that other approaches do not afford. By doing so, each spectrum can be seen neither as analytically separate realms nor dichotomous categorizations, but as multi-sided facets of social inquiry. In turn, this analytic provides a generative framework for drawing out the multiple dynamics at play, from the everyday concerns and practical matters of work and occupation, to the

determining socio-political-economic conditions within which lives are situated, to the goals and aspirations that motivate larger career and life goals, and ultimately to the horizon against which imaginations and dreams are projected. Drawing together the intertwined spheres of life that the concept of "world" affords, not only animates our social imagination in helping us understand ways of life that are different from our own, it brings forth the vitality of the world of undocumented Mexican immigrant kitchen workers in ways that would otherwise remain obscured to the passing eye. It is to the question of world that we will turn in the next chapter.

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